

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF GEORGIA  
WAYCROSS DIVISION

DEMITRIC ANDRE SMITH,

Plaintiff,

v.

ANGELA SPELL-HUTTO,

Defendant.

CIVIL ACTION NO.: 5:16-cv-33

**ORDER and MAGISTRATE JUDGE'S REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Plaintiff, who is currently incarcerated at Wheeler Correctional Facility in Alamo, Georgia, submitted a Complaint pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 alleging that Defendant violated his constitutional rights. (Doc. 1.) The Court has conducted the requisite frivolity review of that Complaint. For the reasons set forth below, I **RECOMMEND** that the Court **DISMISS** Plaintiff's Complaint, **CLOSE** this case, and **DENY** Plaintiff *in forma pauperis* status on appeal.

**BACKGROUND<sup>1</sup>**

Plaintiff filed this action against Defendant for violating his right to access the courts. (*Id.*) Plaintiff alleges that he lost his habeas appeal because Defendant failed to timely mail the order denying his habeas petition. (*Id.* at p. 5.) As a result, Plaintiff only had nine days to file his Certificate of Appeal, and ultimately, the state court denied his appeal for untimeliness.

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<sup>1</sup> The below recited facts are taken from Plaintiff's Complaint and are accepted as true, as they must be at this stage.

## STANDARD OF REVIEW

Plaintiff seeks to bring this action *in forma pauperis*. Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(1), the Court may authorize the filing of a civil lawsuit without the prepayment of fees if the plaintiff submits an affidavit that includes a statement of all of his assets, shows an inability to pay the filing fee, and also includes a statement of the nature of the action which shows that he is entitled to redress. Even if the plaintiff proves indigence, the Court must dismiss the action if it is frivolous or malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(i)–(ii). Additionally, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915A, the Court must review a complaint in which a prisoner seeks redress from a governmental entity. Upon such screening, the Court must dismiss a complaint, or any portion thereof, that is frivolous or malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted or which seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b).

The Court looks to the instructions for pleading contained in the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure when reviewing a Complaint on an application to proceed *in forma pauperis*. See Fed. R. Civ. P. 8 (“A pleading that states a claim for relief must contain [among other things] . . . a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief.”); Fed. R. Civ. P. 10 (requiring that claims be set forth in numbered paragraphs, each limited to a single set of circumstances). Further, a claim is frivolous under Section 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) “if it is ‘without arguable merit either in law or fact.’” Napier v. Preslicka, 314 F.3d 528, 531 (11th Cir. 2002) (quoting Bilal v. Driver, 251 F.3d 1346, 1349 (11th Cir. 2001)).

Whether a complaint fails to state a claim under Section 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) is governed by the same standard applicable to motions to dismiss under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6). Thompson v. Rundle, 393 F. App’x 675, 678 (11th Cir. 2010). Under that

standard, this Court must determine whether the complaint contains “sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to ‘state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.’” Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007)). A plaintiff must assert “more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not” suffice. Twombly, 550 U.S. at 555. Section 1915 also “accords judges not only the authority to dismiss a claim based on an indisputably meritless legal theory, but also the unusual power to pierce the veil of the complaint’s factual allegations and dismiss those claims whose factual contentions are clearly baseless.” Bilal, 251 F.3d at 1349 (quoting Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 327 (1989)).

In its analysis, the Court will abide by the long-standing principle that the pleadings of unrepresented parties are held to a less stringent standard than those drafted by attorneys and, therefore, must be liberally construed. Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972); Boxer X v. Harris, 437 F.3d 1107, 1110 (11th Cir. 2006) (“*Pro se* pleadings are held to a less stringent standard than pleadings drafted by attorneys.”) (emphasis omitted) (quoting Hughes v. Lott, 350 F.3d 1157, 1160 (11th Cir. 2003)). However, Plaintiff’s unrepresented status will not excuse mistakes regarding procedural rules. McNeil v. United States, 508 U.S. 106, 113 (1993) (“We have never suggested that procedural rules in ordinary civil litigation should be interpreted so as to excuse mistakes by those who proceed without counsel.”).

## **DISCUSSION**

### **I. Access to the Courts Claim**

Plaintiff alleges that Defendant frustrated his ability to access the courts when she allegedly mailed the order denying his habeas petition too late. (Doc. 1, p. 5.) “Access to the courts is clearly a constitutional right, grounded in the First Amendment, the Article IV

Privileges and Immunities Clause, the Fifth Amendment, and/or the Fourteenth Amendment.”

Chappell v. Rich, 340 F.3d 1279, 1282 (11th Cir. 2003) (citing Christopher v. Harbury, 536 U.S. 403, 415 n.12 (2002)). However, to bring an access-to-courts claim, an inmate must establish that he suffered an actual injury. In interpreting the actual injury requirement, the Eleventh Circuit stated:

The actual injury which the inmate must demonstrate is an injury to the right asserted, i.e. the right of access. Thus, the . . . official’s actions which allegedly infringed on an inmate’s right of access to the courts must have frustrated or impeded the inmate’s efforts to pursue a nonfrivolous legal claim. See Lewis, 518 U.S. at 352–54. Further, the legal claim must be an appeal from a conviction for which the inmate was incarcerated, a habeas petition or a civil rights action. See id., 518 U.S. at 352–57.

Bass v. Singletary, 143 F.3d 1442, 1445 (11th Cir. 1998).

Plaintiff’s Complaint does not allege enough to satisfy the actual injury prerequisite—he contends that Defendant’s dilatory actions directly impacted and frustrated his ability to timely appeal his habeas decision. However, he still received the order denying his habeas petition with nine days remaining in his time period to seek a certificate of appeal. He fails to explain why he was unable to file for a certificate of appealability or seek an extension of the deadline in this remaining time.

Furthermore, to assert a claim for denial of access, Plaintiff must also show that Defendant acted with intent to frustrate Plaintiff’s ability to appeal his habeas case. See Chappell, 340 F.3d at 1283 (distinguishing between claims of intentional concealment of facts and mere failure to investigate); Simkins v. Bruce, 406 F.3d 1239, 1242 (10th Cir. 2005) (plaintiff must allege intentional conduct interfering with his legal mail to support claim of impeding a right of access to the courts); Snyder v. Nolen, 380 F.3d 279, 291 n.11 (7th Cir. 2004) (“an allegation of simple negligence will not support a claim that an official has denied an

individual access to the courts” and citing cases from other courts holding same). Here, Plaintiff merely alleges that Defendant acted with negligence, or “deficient performance.” (Doc. 1, p. 5) These allegations do not rise to the level of intent necessary to support a claim of interference with access to the courts.

For these reasons, the Court should **DISMISS** Plaintiff’s access to the courts claim against Defendant.

#### **IV. Leave to Appeal *in Forma Pauperis***

The Court should also deny Plaintiff leave to appeal *in forma pauperis*.<sup>2</sup> Though Plaintiff has, of course, not yet filed a notice of appeal, it would be appropriate to address these issues in the Court’s order of dismissal. Fed. R. App. P. 24(a)(3) (trial court may certify that appeal is not taken in good faith “before or after the notice of appeal is filed”).

An appeal cannot be taken *in forma pauperis* if the trial court certifies that the appeal is not taken in good faith. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3); Fed. R. App. P. 24(a)(3). Good faith in this context must be judged by an objective standard. Busch v. Cty. of Volusia, 189 F.R.D. 687, 691 (M.D. Fla. 1999). A party does not proceed in good faith when he seeks to advance a frivolous claim or argument. See Coppededge v. United States, 369 U.S. 438, 445 (1962). A claim or argument is frivolous when it appears the factual allegations are clearly baseless or the legal theories are indisputably meritless. Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 327 (1989); Carroll v. Gross, 984 F.2d 392, 393 (11th Cir. 1993). Or, stated another way, an *in forma pauperis* action is frivolous and, thus, not brought in good faith, if it is “without arguable merit either in law or fact.” Napier v. Preslicka, 314 F.3d 528, 531 (11th Cir. 2002); see also Brown v. United States, Nos. 407CV085, 403CR001, 2009 WL 307872, at \*1–2 (S.D. Ga. Feb. 9, 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> A certificate of appealability is not required in this Section 1983 action.

Based on the above analysis of Plaintiff's action, there are no non-frivolous issues to raise on appeal, and an appeal would not be taken in good faith. Thus, the Court should **DENY** Plaintiff *in forma pauperis* status on appeal.

## CONCLUSION

For the reasons set forth above, I **RECOMMEND** that the Court **DISMISS** Plaintiff's Complaint, **CLOSE** this case, and **DENY** Plaintiff *in forma pauperis* status on appeal.

The Court **ORDERS** any party seeking to object to this Report and Recommendation to file specific written objections within fourteen (14) days of the date on which this Report and Recommendation is entered. Any objections asserting that the Magistrate Judge failed to address any contention raised in the Complaint must also be included. Failure to do so will bar any later challenge or review of the factual findings or legal conclusions of the Magistrate Judge. See 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(C); Thomas v. Arn, 474 U.S. 140 (1985). A copy of the objections must be served upon all other parties to the action. The filing of objections is not a proper vehicle through which to make new allegations or present additional evidence.

Upon receipt of Objections meeting the specificity requirement set out above, a United States District Judge will make a *de novo* determination of those portions of the report, proposed findings, or recommendation to which objection is made and may accept, reject, or modify in whole or in part, the findings or recommendations made by the Magistrate Judge. Objections not meeting the specificity requirement set out above will not be considered by a District Judge. A party may not appeal a Magistrate Judge's report and recommendation directly to the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. Appeals may be made only from a final

judgment entered by or at the direction of a District Judge. The Clerk of Court is **DIRECTED** to serve a copy of this Report and Recommendation upon the Plaintiff.

**SO ORDERED and REPORTED and RECOMMENDED**, this 8th day of August, 2016.



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R. STAN BAKER  
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE  
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF GEORGIA